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ABSTRACT

Although Matthew Arnold may appear to be the representative of an increasingly irrelevant elitist vision by advocating a culture ultimately dependent on the exclusion of all but the very best in thought and expression, in fact he remains the writer who reminds us of the necessity for a social vision of ourselves superior to any mere provincialism. Various critics of the Arnoldian concept of culture, including Walt Whitman, G. John Roush, and Louis Kampf, have attempted to explain the separation of the Arnoldian ideal from ordinary reality, in his day and ours. However, Arnold's concept that the provincial spirit--the ordinary self--opposes the ideal of the potential best self--led not by a class spirit but by a general humane spirit--is suprisingly applicable to Americans today. Arnold shows most clearly how imperfect and inhumane our destiny will be if Americans cannot transcend their trend toward provinciality. (JM)

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Confessions of a Would-be Non-Provincial--Or, the English Teacher and Matthew Arnold's Ghost

There was an earlier title I had for this paper--"Matthew Arnold at Disneyland"--and I'm still not sure that the first title isn't a more accurate one. For the ironic vibrations set off by the fact that we're attending an academic convention in Anaheim, California, seem to me to come logically to rest in the emblematic figure of Arnold himself. In particular I'm thinking of the extraordinary weight Arnold gave to the term "culture," and of the way that Arnoldian definition looks today, within a strong stone's throw of the sprawling amusement park Walt Disney first opened here in July of 1955, after having already achieved by that date more than a quarter-century of which I suppose we have no choice but to call a fantastic, fabulous, and incredible success in providing the world with popular entertainment.

To Arnold, of course, the first requisite of "culture" was our "getting to know . . . the best which has been thought and said in the world."[1] To us, however, a century more battle-worn than Arnold (if no wiser), the location of a secure "best" among all that the world has thought and said now seems an undertaking for which only the most sheltered of us still retains anything like the implicit assurance that Arnold himself possessed. Indeed, the resolution which is scheduled to come before the business meeting of this conference on Sunday for its consideration--that "we affirm the students' right to their own patterns

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and varieties of language"[2]--indicates how far we've traveled from that happy confidence of the academic mind to which Arnold gave characteristic expression in August of 1864. Then, in an essay for the Cornhill Magazine with the wonderfully appropriate title of "The Literary Influence of Academies," Arnold had occasion to lament, among a number of other shortcomings he had detected in the average Englishman's use of language, the peculiar habits in spelling to which the London Times was occasionally disposed:

> Every one [Arnold writes,] has noticed the way in which the Times chooses to spell the word "diocese"; it always spells it "diocess" deriving it, I suppose, from Zeus and census. . . . Some people will say these are little things; they are not; they are of bad example. They tend to spread the baneful notion that there is no such thing as a high correct standard in intellectual matters; that every one may as well take his own way; they are at variance with the severe discipline necessary for all real culture; they confirm us in habits of wilfulness and eccentricity, which hurt our minds, and damage our credit with serious people.[3]

To invoke the name of Matthew Arnold at Disneyland, then, is inevitably to suggest a contrast which ~~isn't~~ doesn't seem in the least bit flattering to his prophetic powers. The advocate of a "culture" which depended ultimately upon the exclusion of all but the very "best" in thought and expression, the critic whose standard of "high seriousness"

was so severe that he could judge even Chaucer deficient in it (PA, p. 317), the writer who confidently predicted to an American audience in 1883 that "the instinct of self-preservation in humanity" would make "the study of Greek more prevalent than it is now" (PA, pp. 426-427), Arnold would appear to be, at this time and in this place, the representative of an elitist vision that has grown increasingly irrelevant in the ninety years since his death.

Nor, surely, do we need the accidental proximity of Walt Disney's unstately pleasure dome to suggest how vulnerable at least one aspect of Arnold's conception of "culture" has become. For I doubt if there's any one of us here--any one of us, at any rate, who's been teaching for more than a few years--who hasn't been struck by the peculiar shape the "English" curriculum has taken on during the past decade, under the impact of a much more flexible definition of "literature" and "art" than Matthew Arnold ever dreamed. Courses in science fiction, courses in "The Art of the Film" courses in "The Detective as Hero," courses no doubt even in Walt Disney--I don't think I have to spell out how seriously our traditional role as the transmitters of a standard body of literary knowledge has been brought into question in recent years by the increasing possibility that a radical transformation in the idea of "culture" itself is now already well underway.[4] For the cynics among us--of whom I estimate there are exactly fifty percent--this intrusion of a host of brash new courses into our "English" departments can probably be described pretty adequately by resorting to an image from gardening: as our once lush enrollments in traditional subjects have withered to straggly ground covers, more and more we're finding

ourselves driven to the desperate expedient of shoveling piles of horse manure on top of the old curriculum, in a frantic attempt to get some kind of growth started again in "English." For the idealists among us, on the other hand--of whom again I estimate there are exactly fifty percent--the emergence of these new courses represents the first welcome signs of spring in a landscape that for too long has been left gray and barren by our unrealistic commitment to an elitist ideal. And, in fact, at least from the more optimistic of these two viewpoints, the resolution regarding the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" can surely be seen as little more than another example, however significant by itself, of a general greening of the grayness behind academic walls. For if, as the proposed resolution suggests, we do accept the students' language as equal in legitimacy to our own, then we're also acknowledging even further how questionable has been our easy assumption of superiority in the past when we've criticized our students' taste in cultural matters--their appetite for science fiction, for instance, or for what we used to call "Hollywood movies," or for rock music, or for even (to mention that dread nemesis of us all) television.

But whether we're inclined towards the cynical or the idealistic, I doubt if there are many of us on either side of the academic garden who'd want to argue that something important isn't happening to the idea of "English" as a discipline. Indeed, so great has the distance grown between what I assume was once for most of us a confident sense of our social mission to dispense Arnoldian light and our present state of uncertainty concerning the exact nature of our relationship to society that any number of commentators have appeared on the scene to explain the

phenomenon of the change for us.

Of these commentators one of the most satisfying for me has been G. Jon Roush--largely, I suppose, because Roush is one of the few recent critics of the Arnoldian ideal to make a real effort to confront at least some of the assumptions that underlie the traditional concept of "culture." In particular I'm thinking of the article Roush published in Daedalus in the summer of 1969, where he isolated three crucial beliefs in the cultural faith of the past: that there are permanent values which the best human intelligence can safely be trusted to locate and identify; that these values already reside to an exemplary degree in a recognized body of acknowledged masterpieces (for example, in Plato's dialogues, Shakespeare's and Sophocles' plays, Milton's and Homer's poetry, the prose fiction of Hawthorne, the novels of Jane Austen); and that the moral relevance of these works for our current society is assured by the continuum of history, which indissolubly links the artistic and intellectual triumphs of the past to our own troubled present. Nevertheless--continues Roush--

> those three assumptions, which worked so well for Matthew Arnold, have been called into question by a number of changes that seem to have separated us irrevocably from Arnold. The most important of those changes is the growth of a worldwide and culturally pervasive technology, with its attendent democratization of education and power. Traditionally the studia humanitatis have been the concern of a select group within the society. It was possible to maintain that situation until after World War I and to

> pretend to maintain it until after World War II, but the situation has changed with the expansion of education and leisure. In the past, the values of the many seemed inimical to the best judgment of the few in matters intellectual and artistic. We have now assumed responsibility for democratizing that judgment, and it seems unlikely that we can do so without changing the nature of the values.[5]

But although Roush, as we see, is willing to give significant place in his analysis to the process of "democratization," it remained for Louis Kampf to draw the sharply political conclusions that Roush had barely more than implied. Delivering the presidential address in 1971 to the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, Kampf took the opportunity to point out how complacent and self-serving our traditional adherence to the Arnoldian ideal of culture might seem to someone who was not himself a part of our shared academic enterprise. "At some level," Kampf declared, "anyone who comes into our profession believes in the redemptive power of literature, its capacity to ennoble a fallen world. . . . But literature performs these functions in the private world of our feelings. Its capacity to bring wholeness to our lives depends on its construction of an emotive and intellectual world which exists apart from the everyday, utilitarian one." And this separation of the Arnoldian ideal from ordinary reality--continued Kampf--is so seriously pronounced that it cannot help but prove unhealthy for us as academics, both in a moral and in a social sense:

> Separating thought from work and action, theory from practice, and designating thought and theory as superior, intrinsically

> more noble activities, clearly serves the social interests of those who do intellectual work. . . . It should hardly come as a surprise [then] that the intelligentsia will generalize its own interests in the interests of humanity: what's good for us is good for everybody, and therefore above class interest or social conflict. Thus the enclave inside which we live pretty well and even enjoy ourselves is really for the benefit of humanity--except most of it has to be kept out.[6]

Nor, of course, has this political challenge to our complacencies really been quite the voice crying in the wilderness that Kampf assumes for himself as a rhetorical stance. For if the analysis by Roush of our cultural democratization provides a kind of Poetics after the fact to explain the proliferation of courses in areas like film and popular fiction, then Kampf's critique of Arnoldian exclusiveness in front of an audience composed of members of the Modern Language Association can surely be seen as the accreditation of impulses which, by the time of Kampf's address, had already begun to reshape the "English" curriculum from a consciously political perspective--with courses such as "Black American Literature," "Women in Literature," "The Literature of Protest."

Morecver, neither Roush's criticism of Arnold nor Kampf's--damaging as each may be--takes sufficient account of how vulnerable Arnold's ideas have always been within the specific context of American life. But in the resonant figure of Walt Whitman, that nearly exact contemporary of Arnold's, I think we can find most usefully the understandable

American note of resistance to the ideal of a culture founded on historical continuity and a strict hierarchy of values. "He came in," Whitman remarked of Arnold in 1888, the year of Arnold's death,

> He came in at the rear of a procession two thousand years old--the great army of critics, parlor apostles, worshippers of hangings, laces, and so forth and so forth--they never have anything properly at first hand.[7]

Again, in the course of reflecting on Arnold's political tendencies, Whitman observed:

> Arnold was weak on the democratic side: he had some intellectual perception of democracy but he didn't have the feel of the thing: all his antecedents, training, the schools he went to, were against it: he was first of all the superior, the leader, the teacher: he has a theory about the saving remnant: he is that salvation, that remnant.[8]

And still again, in what is probably Whitman's best-known criticism of Arnold, the good gray poet of Camden lamented Arnold's lack of faith in common humanity:

> Arnold always gives you the notion that he hates to touch the dirt--the dirt is so dirty! But everything comes out of the dirt--everything: everything comes out of the people, the everyday people, the people as you find them and leave them: not university people, not F. F. V. people: people, people, just people![9]

And yet, with all of this granted against Arnold and the Arnoldian ideal of "culture," I still think something deserves to be said for him today as a continuing value in our lives. Quite possibly, his ghost would be an uneasy one were it to look down upon the current state of higher education in this country. At the same time, it seems clear to me that we could be haunted by far more malevolent spirits than Arnold's. And if John Henry Raleigh is right (as I believe he is) that "Arnold has exercised. . . [a] powerful and continuing hold . . . over the [American] academic mind,"[10] then I think we ought to be permitted a very brief moment of self-congratulation for our good sense--or luck--in having chosen a figure like Arnold for our guide, when we might just as easily have chosen the later Carlyle or the T. S. Eliot of the most reactionary nonsense.

By this, however, I don't at all mean to discount the many criticisms of Arnold I've already detailed in the course of this paper. On the contrary, the discriminations drawn by both Roush and Kampf receive their general support from an intellectual standard of Arnold's own: that the true function of criticism is "to see the object as in itself it really is" (PA, p. 234). And with that high standard as our guide, I don't see how we can avoid perceiving Arnold's limitations: his excessive faith in the power of disciplined rationality, his indifference to the taste of non-bookish people, his lack of comprehension of the genuine irrelevance of abstract intellectuality for the overwhelming majority of mankind. In short, what we've come to see--and what I think Arnold would have wanted us to see--are how the limitations of his class and of his era prevented him from engaging in the full play of his human sympathies.

Yet before such a conclusion induces in us too great a sense of our own righteousness I think we must also recognize the moral dimensions of Arnold's encounter with the inevitable limitations of his age. For despite Kampf's somewhat misleading emphasis on the separation of Arnold between thought and action, Arnold himself granted "the main and pre-eminent part" of culture to "the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it." And culture, Arnold continued, "moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good" (C & A, pp. 44-45).

Now no doubt it would be possible to deflate at least some of the grandeur from these assertions by showing how they stem from Arnold's own unconscious assumption of a superior inner light. But I think it would be unjust not to show as well, in contradistinction to Kampf's emphasis upon the "private" quality of the Arnoldian vision, how deep is the social anguish implied in Arnold's contemplation of a merely personal effort at salvation:

> Perfection, as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated. The individual is required, under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection, to be continually doing all he can to enlarge and increase the volume of the human stream sweeping thitherward. (C & A, p. 48).

Moreover, as I believe we ought to remember, it was Arnold who, while addressing the Royal Institute in 1876 on the subject of "Equality,"

told his potentially hostile audience that

> the well-being of the many comes out more and more distinctly, in proportion as time goes on, as the object we must pursue. An individual or a class, concentrating their efforts upon their own well-being exclusively, do but beget troubles both for others and for themselves also. . . . Certainly equality will never of itself alone give us a perfect civilisation. But, with such inequality as ours, a perfect civilisation is impossible. (PA, pp. 588-589, 606)

Yet despite the evident modernity of these ideas (or, perhaps, precisely because of it) it seems to me that the most valuable Arnoldian conception for us today is a much narrower one than the generalities I've been discussing up to now--the conception Arnold had of the provincial spirit. For we hardly need to go back into the nineteenth century to find a writer to persuade us of the advantages of equality. Far from it, in fact. For, as Lionel Trilling has recently observed in his Mind in the Modern World, "With the rapidly developing opinion that our colleges and universities do not further equality to the extent that was once supposed, their equalizing function is being made fully explicit and the tendency grows even stronger to say that they must be wholly defined by the function in which they are now said to fail."[11] For that reason, then, I think we can discover a new and significant relevance in the Arnoldian concept of provinciality.

I say "provinciality," because I suspect this particular term is the one with the most meaningful connotations for us today--although Arnold himself used a number of other expressions as well to describe

the presence in individuals of a narrow self-confidence in the absolute worth of their own beliefs and the beliefs of their class. "The provincial spirit exaggerates the value of its [own] ideas," Arnold tells us in "The Literary Influence of Academies." "To get rid of provinciality is a certain stage of culture; a stage the positive result of which we must not make of too much importance, but which is, nevertheless, indispensable; for it brings us on to the platform where alone the best and highest intellectual work can be said fairly to begin" (PA, pp. 288, 283). And in a series of passages in Culture and Anarchy which perhaps constitute the most interesting sequence of Arnold's discussion of this quality, Arnold virtually identifies the provincial spirit with the "ordinary self" in all of us:

> People of the aristocratic class want to affirm their ordinary selves, their likings and dislikings; people of the middle class the same, people of the working class the same. By our every-day selves, however, we are separate, personal, at war; we are only safe from one another's tyranny when no one has any power; and this safety, in its turn, cannot save us from anarchy. (C & A, p. 95)

To this provincial "ordinary self," however, Arnold opposes the idea of our potential "best self":

> In each class there are born a certain number of natures with a curiosity about their best self, with a bent for seeing things as they are, for disentangling themselves from machinery. . . . And this bent always tends to take them out of their class, and to make their distinguishing

> charactistic . . . their humanity. [In short, non-provincial] persons . . . are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general humane spirit, by the love of human perfection. (C & A, pp. 108-109)

Now much of the point for me of this Arnoldian critique of provinciality is its surprising applicability to us today as Americans. It's surprising, I think, because, as I imagine we'd all agree, one of the elements of American life on which we've always prided ourselves has been our relative classlessness. Indeed, a good deal of the resentment many people seem to feel even now at the appearance of various protest groups in our society--American Indians, blacks, women, homosexuals--almost surely springs from the threat the emergence of these groups conveys to our traditionally comfortable illusion that the promises of American life are actually open to all of us, in equal fashion, provided only that we're willing and able enough to seize hold of them by our own isolated efforts.

I don't think I have to stress that this particular illusion has been challenged so often in recent years that probably only a small percentage of us still retain anything like our earlier unquestioned faith in it--perhaps in fact no more than the 26% of the nation that Louis Harris tells us still place their trust in Richard Nixon. But the tradition of our belief in our classlessness, however much we may want to qualify it now, does suggest the actual existence of a social fluidity for us quite different from the hierarchies of class Arnold himself knew. Moreover, this relative social fluidity of ours has been enormously compounded since World War II by the advances of a technology

which now seems on the verge of being able to restructure our values virtually from year to year.

Nevertheless, the effect of this conjunction hasn't really been to make us more classless than before. On the contrary, it seems pretty evident that we're now going to have to confront a much greater probability of falling victim to the provincial spirit than we ever have in the past, either as Americans or as academics. For I'm afraid there's no other reasonable way of interpreting what has clearly been the most noticeable social phenomenon of the past decade--the proliferation of splinter groups within our nation whose explicit purpose has been (as some of these groups have expressed it themselves) " the raising of consciousness" of their indefensible distance from the full promise of American social justice.

Nor, frankly, do I see how we can continue to pretend to ourselves that we're the last bastion of non-provincialism, insulated from this phenomenon by our tradition of "disinterest" and "academic freedom." For in a post-industrial society such as ours, with economic priorities that seem increasingly to suggest how insignificant is the fate of higher education in all but its more practical aspects, our own assumption of a narrowly militant position may be closer than many of us like to think. One part of what I'm suggesting, then, is that a willed consciousness of our own provinciality as academic humanists may be the paradoxically necessary step for us (as it has been for many blacks and women) in order to re-establish at least something of the validity of the American promise of a fuller life for us all. But what I'd really want to suggest with much greater force here today is the significance of

Arnold's ideas for reminding us of a social vision superior to any mere provincialism of our ordinary selves. It may be, of course, that the fate of America is never to be anything more than a nation of provincials, and that the events of the past decade have only advanced us even further along the road towards fulfilling that destiny. But I think Arnold remains the writer who, perhaps better than any other of the last hundred years, can most clearly show us how imperfect and inhumane that fate will be, if we cannot transcend it.

Notes

[1] Culture and Anarchy, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960), p. 6; hereafter cited above in the text as C&A.

[2] From the Executive Committee Recommendation of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Philadelphia, November, 1973; emphasis mine. The full resolution, entitled "Students Rights to Their Own Language," reads as follows: "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language."

[3] The Portable Matthew Arnold, ed. Lionel Trilling (New York: Viking Press, 1959), pp. 280-281; hereafter cited above in the text as PA.

[4] See especially Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), pp. 305-312.

[5] "What Will Become of the Past?" pp. 643-644.

[6] "'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)': Literature and Language in the Academy," PMLA, 87, No. 3 (May, 1972), 378-379.

[7] Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden: March 28-July 14, 1888 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), p. 23.

[8] Ibid., January 21-April 7, 1889, ed. Sculley Bradley (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1953), p. 37

[9] Ibid., March 28-July 14, 1888, p. 232.

[10] Matthew Arnold and American Culture (Berkely: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1957), pp. 220-221.

[11] (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 25.